

First record of the Metallic Starling *Aplonis metallica* in the Northern Territory

Chris Healey

Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management,
Northern Territory University, Darwin, NT, 0909

Two Metallic Starlings *Aplonis metallica* were observed by the author in a suburban garden in Millner, Darwin, on the morning of 5 August 2002. They were kept under observation from about 9.30 to 9.40 am with the aid of binoculars (10x), during which time they moved quietly and unhurriedly in and below the crown of an unidentified rainforest tree approximately 9 m high. At least one bird was visible for most of the ten minutes of observation. My observation point varied from about 7 to 10 m from the base of the tree, with the sun directly behind me. The birds moved in and out of bright sunlight against a background of dense foliage of the rainforest tree, large clumping bamboo and a *Schefflera* tree. Viewing conditions were optimal with bright illumination and without glare or silhouetting against the sky.

The birds were an adult and immature or subadult. The adult bird was the first seen, and was most visible during the period of observation. The subadult bird appeared lower down in the same tree and was seen in full view for several minutes. The Starlings appeared to be foraging in the tree, which was fruiting, but I was unable to confirm whether they ate any of the fruit. Several Figbirds *Sphacotheres viridis* and a Yellow Oriole *Oriolus flavocinctus* were observed feeding on fruit in the same tree while the Starlings were present. While the subadult bird remained in the shade in the lower canopy, the adult remained high in the canopy, moving through the foliage and perching in full sunshine for about four minutes on a prominent horizontal branch extending beyond the canopy of the tree. The adult flew suddenly from the tree giving a subdued call, comprising a single short, rising note: 'chirrp'. The birds were otherwise silent.

The author is familiar with the Metallic Starling and close relatives, which I have observed in eastern Cape York, Papua New Guinea and eastern Indonesia. The size, shape of tail and highly iridescence plumage ruled out possible confusion with the Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus*.

The Metallic Starling does not appear to have been recorded in the Northern Territory previously, and I therefore provide a description of the birds, based on notes taken at the time. These notes were made immediately after observing the birds, and prior to consulting the standard field guides (Slater *et al.* 1989, Strahan 1996, Pizzey & Knight 1996, Simpson & Day 1999).

Adult

Length: 20-22 cm. Tail relatively long with pointed feathers. Entire plumage glossy black with lanceolate feathers on neck and upper breast. Rich iridescent purple sheen with green tints, particularly on neck, upper breast and crown. Prominent eye, noticeably bulging when viewed front on; iris brilliant vermillion.

Immature or Subadult

Same size and general shape as adult. Dark brownish black dorsally, crown blackish. Pale ventrally, with clear white belly and under tail coverts, rather duller on breast and throat; breast and sides of belly boldly streaked in dark brown, with streaking becoming finer and denser on upper breast, throat and chin, giving an overall dark appearance to chin and throat. Iris russet.

The description of the adult is consistent with the field guides cited above. The description of the subadult is consistent with published accounts of immature birds except for the darker throat and iris colour.

The Metallic Starling is commonly encountered in flocks in rainforest, parks and gardens in eastern Cape York peninsula. The species is also widespread in New Guinea and most satellite islands, the Solomon Islands, and the Maluku region of eastern Indonesia (Beehler *et al.* 1986, Coates 1990, Coates & Bishop 1997). This record of the Metallic Starling in Darwin is at least 1,000 km west of its normal Australian range. The nearest population to Darwin is on the islands of Tanimbar (c. 500 km north of Darwin) and Damar in south Maluku, where Coates & Bishop (1997) consider it to be uncommon to rare. The south Maluku population was considered by White and Bruce (1986) to constitute a separate subspecies, *Aplonis metallica circumscripta*, which is distinctive in the whole head to upper back and chest being bright reddish violet, with only a little green on the lower throat and upper mantle. The above description of the Darwin adult is not inconsistent with subspecies *circumscripta*, but is insufficient to distinguish it from the Australian form. The subspecific identity of the Darwin birds must therefore remain inconclusive, and provides no evidence of their possible origin.

Australian populations of the Metallic Starling migrate between Cape York Peninsula and the New Guinea mainland, arriving in Australia in July or August to breed, and departing to New Guinea in February to April (Coates 1990, Draffan *et al.* 1983, Pizzey & Knight 1996, Simpson & Day 1999). It appears that regular migration does not occur elsewhere in the species' range, and New Guinea populations may be highly nomadic (Coates 1990). Breeding has been recorded in Papua New Guinea in all months, but with most records between July and October (Coates 1990, p. 356). I have recorded the species breeding in October in the Aru Islands south of the Papuan (Irian Jaya) mainland in Indonesia. There appears to be no available data on the move-

ments or breeding times of populations in the Maluku range of the species (cf. Coates and Bishop 1997).

If the Darwin birds were vagrants from Cape York, the subadult most probably would be at least one year old, as breeding in Australia does not normally commence until August, and this is also likely the case if the birds were vagrants from New Guinea. On the basis of proximity, the Darwin birds were perhaps more likely to be vagrants from the poorly understood populations in south Maluku, while the New Guinea mainland is also a possible source given the regular migration south in July-August. However, on the available evidence the origins of the Darwin birds must remain a matter of speculation.

References

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